



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Release September 21, 1981

Alan Levitt 202/343-5634

MILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN FURS, JEWELRY, AND CURIOS  
MADE FROM PROTECTED WILDLIFE TO BE DISPOSED OF:  
AUDIT POINTS TO INADEQUATE STORAGE AND ACCOUNTING PROCEDURES

What do you do with 5,000 tortoiseshell guitar picks? Or 1200 pairs of shoes made from Nile crocodile? Or any of the other tens of thousands of wildlife products filling government warehouses across the country?

You don't just store and forget them, according to an Interior Department Inspector General's report that points out this material has been accumulated without regard to its ultimate disposal. The report also found that the Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had extremely weak accounting and security procedures and that a large number of the items could not be accounted for at one of the storage facilities audited.

Secretary of the Interior James G. Watt said that "as part of immediate and effective steps to remedy the situation," his department would propose regulations this week allowing the sale, transfer and destruction of these items.

The Fish and Wildlife Service now owns more than \$5 millions worth of products made from protected species such as jaguar coats, crocodile handbags, tortoiseshell jewelry, elephant footstools and polar bear rugs. These items have become government property after being involved in violations of U.S. or foreign wildlife laws. Many were seized by U.S. Customs or Fish and Wildlife Service officials after being illegally imported in commercial shipments, smuggled, or purchased by unsuspecting tourists.

"Our reviews indicate that weaknesses in the property accountability system not only have resulted in these items being unaccounted for, but created the potential for fraud, abuse, and theft if these problems are not corrected," Interior Inspector General Mulberry said. He added however, that the audit covered only two (Baltimore and New York) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices that are responsible for seizing property at ports of entry for the United States. The New York facility has more than 49,000 items in storage. More than 2400 items could not be located there. No missing items were reported at the Baltimore facility that was audited.

Secretary Watt said, "I commend the work done by the Inspector General's office. Now that these weaknesses have been brought to light, we are determined to correct them. We are very serious about our efforts to give the taxpayers the most efficient government we can provide." Watt pointed out that the Department had received authority to dispose of the property in 1978 but that no action had been taken by the previous Administration.

